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Inspiring Creativity in Your Employees

Don't think of your employees as very creative? Here's why it's important to encourage them to think outside the box.

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So you say you're not creative? And your employees aren't either? Then "physician, heal thyself." *You* may be the source of the problem!

Everyone can be creative--it has nothing to do with smarts. In fact, having smarts is no guarantee that you can or will be creative. But just what is creativity? Dr. Theresa Amabile of Harvard Business School defines it as the process of doing something differently that works. That's it. Real easy.

But why should you and your employees work creatively? It's simple: Creative people tend to be more motivated because they've achieved something. They've discovered a better way of doing things or they've solved a problem by thinking outside the box. By successfully finding solutions, they're more motivated to work. And the more motivated they are, the more productive they are. And the more productive they are, the more satisfied and motivated they are. The cycle endlessly recreates itself.

But before you can increase creativity in your employees, you need to figure out why they're not creative now. Once you know where to look, the answers are usually obvious.

Let's first look at your employees. You need to determine whether or not they have the necessary knowledge, skills, resources and abilities to successfully get their jobs done. Are they hard pressed to find the correct and/or best materials to complete their jobs? Do they have the right experiences and ability level to allow them to be effective? As I said, being intelligent doesn't guarantee that they're creative. On the other hand, not being intelligent or educated most certainly does not lead to creativity!

If you decide your employees don't have the best knowledge, skills, abilities and resources, then you need to decide how to get them further education and training, hire better people or provide more challenging experiences.

Next, look at your attitude toward doing things differently. How often do you or your employees ever say "We can't do it that way because...", "It costs too much money," "We've always done it this way," "They won't let me do it that way" or "It's too hard." These and similar expressions are direct killers of creativity.

What can you do? When you hear yourself or your employees using one of these excuses, stop! Turn those negative statements into positive ones such as these:

"It may be hard to do it, but here are some ideas how we can do it."

"It's expensive, but let's see how we can still come in under budget."

"Let's see how we can increase the budget."

Once you convince your employees to think positively, an entire new world of possibilities emerges.

Actually, thinking positively also involves an aspect of risk-taking. Do you allow or even encourage your employees to take risks? What kind? To what extent? To what dollar amount? I've known many employees who've had creative circuits running through their

brains but were afraid the boss would penalize or criticize them if they spoke up. Sometimes when the money crunch puts the squeeze on departments and employees are afraid of losing their jobs, they hold back and resist the temptation to be creative.

As the boss, when you witness these occurrences, you have a marvelous opportunity to chime in and encourage "appropriate" levels of risk-taking. For example, when you hear a manager reject an idea because it sounds too absurd, simply ask, "What's the worse thing that could happen if that person acted on his or her idea?" As the boss, you need to encourage more risk-taking and more creative thinking on the part of your employees.

So once you've assessed your employees' knowledge, skills, abilities and resources and have started to encourage risk-taking and positive thinking, you can move on to noting individual and group motivational levels. Find out why people are motivated--or not. For those who aren't motivated--or aren't motivated enough--don't hesitate to find out the reasons and obstacles that prevent them from being highly productive, highly effective employees. Remember, high levels of motivation, energy and enthusiasm are related to increased levels of creativity.

Next, I suggest you move past your employees to focus on the work environment. Have you or others created unnecessary and possibly restrictive levels of rules, regulations and procedures? If so, you've just identified more obstacles to thinking and behaving creatively. An atmosphere like this can stifle people by decreasing their risk-taking behavior.

You also need to determine if your employees fear stepping out of line to come up with new ideas? Do they fear questioning you or other managers? Do they fear working in small groups and not by themselves? Do they fear losing their jobs or receiving negative comments or evaluations from their supervisors? If so, you've discovered yet another threat to creativity--the fear of recrimination.

Finally, ask yourself just how often you or your managers seek opportunities to recognize and praise your employees. Most people praise their pets much more than they praise others in the workplace. Simple statements such as "Nice job," "Well done," "Nice try," "Great improvement" or "I'm glad you're trying" are extremely powerful inducers of a positive working environment and a more creative and satisfied workforce.

So take a moment to ask yourself just what you can do to increase your own levels of creativity and those of your employees. Enjoy the adventure.

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